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WOMEN AND TRAINING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

From the point of view of its implications for women, this thesis critically investigates the official discourse of training in New Zealand in the late 1980s and 1990s, and explores its effects within the Polytechnic sector. The more theoretical side of the project involves discussing the changing meanings of 'training' and its entangled relationship with 'education'. I then conduct a thorough examination of the key statement of the new training discourse - *Education for the Twenty-first Century* - and give a twofold account of its structure and meaning. One part of this discourse is oriented towards social pluralism and equity, but this strand is undercut by the dominant 'human capital' perspective which ultimately holds little prospect for real advance in women's training and labour market situation.

The more empirical dimension of the thesis involves a quantitative analysis of enrolment statistics, a discourse analysis of Polytechnic reports, and a questionnaire/interview schedule with senior staff within one Polytechnic. Overall, there is little evidence that government strategy and ideology are contested within Polytechnics, and whilst women's *participation* rates may be buoyant, the *content* of their training courses and the consequent *image* of what sort of life women make for themselves could be seen as surprisingly traditional.

At all levels of the work, I try to highlight important indications of progress or contradiction, where they exist. But on the whole, the sobering thought emerging from the thesis is that there is still a long way to go for a properly non-sexist training agenda.

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PREFACE and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest in women and training is the result of a number of years' experience as a trainer working in a variety of adult and community education contexts, and also as a frequent participant in professional training. Much of my work and thinking in these courses could be said to have been inspired by feminist concerns, concerns covering a wide-range of disadvantage, and therefore scope for positive action; for example, the inappropriate programmes for young women in youth clubs, the dearth of female 'leaders' in the Outdoors, and the very limited training opportunities for women returning to the workforce. Involvement in these training initiatives allowed me to contribute to improving the skills and self-images of particular groups of women, and I certainly saw some real, positive and often even 'empowering' results. Yet such gains as have been made have always felt like an uphill battle against still-entrenched attitudes amongst many men, women and local government authorities alike, about standard gender roles and likely social destinations. So, the kinds of training programmes I participated in or led, whilst accepted to an extent as a 'good thing', were usually funded on soft moneys, were temporary or one-off in nature, and generally remained outside of the 'mainstream'.

In addition, some courses, or specific parts of them resulted in quite negative experiences for both 'trainees' and trainer alike. In trying to come to terms with and minimise such sessions, there seemed, longer term, two main ways in which I could enhance my own contribution and understanding. Firstly, I felt I probably needed to continue to improve my own practical 'skills'. To that end I continued to attend various staff-development workshops and training sessions. At the same time, the 'structural' pressures which mitigate against the full success of 'training for women' initiatives go beyond matters of individual competence. I therefore felt the need to extend my thinking about the whole question of gendered training and its wider socio-political context, and the result is this thesis. What counts as training and what does not? Why are some forms of training recognised and others not? Why do some jobs require training and others do not? An interest in such questions, from the point of view of women, is the focus of concern behind this work.

My shift in location from the UK to Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the consequent dislocation from my own particular career trajectory in Britain, seemed to help considerably in getting the kind of 'distance' necessary to look at the general issue afresh, and I was also greatly motivated by the idea of researching in a new (but still related) political context the apparent changes in the 'official' approach to education and training policy, again particularly as it related to women. The process of working on the thesis has thus proved to be a stimulating challenge in the way that it brought together theoretical, political, empirical and practical issues for me.

I want to express thanks to all those who gave their support and encouragement in the course of this work, especially to my supervisors Anne-Marie O'Neill and Celia Briar; to Sue Tait for help with computing and tables; to staff at 'Midland' Polytechnic; and to various personnel at other polytechnics who were generous with their time. Finally I want to thank Gregor McLennan who in his own generous way made sure that the thesis became a reality.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a renewed interest in the area of training in recent years as evidenced by the increasing numbers of articles in newspapers in New Zealand and elsewhere. Predictions of skills shortages and the consequent effects on the nation's ability to compete in the international marketplace are commonplace. Training is promoted as a way of rectifying these problems as well as those of unemployment, dependancy on welfare, entrenched work habits and economic regeneration. Government-sponsored schemes promote training for the unemployed, the disabled, lone parents, redundant workers, school-leavers and the long-term unemployed. Such is the accepted currency of the term that its meaning and purpose is seemingly accepted without question. Yet apart from some academic attention the term is rarely defined and there is little if any popular discussion about what training is, how well it is working, who it works for, or indeed if there are even any alternatives.

The basic thought process behind the project was that in a labour market which already advantages men, new ideological and policy initiatives which bind 'education' and 'training' to the current needs of the capitalist labour market even more tightly are likely to further disadvantage and marginalise women. It made sense in that context to look at how training is defined and operationalised in official government discourse, and how training is promoted and

provided specifically at ***Polytechnic*** level, since this sector is arguably the most central and pressure-sensitive when it comes to delivering vocational education. It would have been highly desirable to have gone beyond provision and participation rates to see what labour market *outcomes* were for women who have taken accredited training courses at Polytechnics, but that kind of extension was basically too large an empirical task to undertake for this dissertation.

On the whole, the connections I make seem to confirm the idea that women are still being disadvantaged in the labour market by current training emphases. This theme should not however be taken as my only concern. I have found training discourses to be interestingly contradictory at all levels of the 'transmission' process, and it is important to recognise that different 'stakeholders' in the area have different ways of operating those discourses. For example, it is not even clear if government perceptions of what industry 'needs' match up in any obvious way with what 'business' thinks it needs.¹ But there have been numerous policy reports over the past two decades which confidently speak of the industrial, technological and educational needs of the nation as if these things were 'neutral' or factual matters.² In that regard, one of the things I have been persuaded of in the course of this investigation is that even where, as with women and training, we are dealing with tangible causes and effects which affect real lives, these mechanisms nevertheless operate through *discursive* means - through often vaguely expressed 'goals' whose definition and implementation are actually very contestable. In the thesis, I do not adopt any doctrinal method of 'discourse analysis', but more generally emphasise how the ideologies and practices of training are discursively constituted. For that reason alone, even where it seems that women have little to gain from current training

¹ See, for example, a paper given by Roger Kerr, director of the Business Roundtable, to the Institute for International Research Conference on Skill Development and Industry Training in which he challenges a number of tenets, fundamental to government's strategy on training, for example, the assumption that New Zealand is under-investing in training (Kerr 1994:1).

² Catherwood 1985, Hawke 1988, Haines & Callister 1989.

initiatives and ideologies, it could be a negative move for feminists and educationalists to just 'write training off' as a *fait accompli*.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter One conducts a discussion of three main background dimensions of women and training. The first is to identify the key possible meanings of the idea of training, and the second is to identify key stakeholders in the training policy environment of recent times. That 'environment' has been the creation, to a large extent, of 'New Right' movements and governments, and some account of the 'restructuring' impetus in education and government in New Zealand, as elsewhere, in the 1980s and 1990s is inescapable, familiar though it is by now. Thirdly, the important theoretical and empirical literature on women and the labour market is synthesised.

The next two chapters explore how the discourse of training is presented in key government documents, especially *Education for the Twenty-first Century* (hereafter *E21C*). I understand this text and others related to it as containing different elements, a 'pluralist' and a 'business' element, and operating on different levels, a general 'societal-ideological' level and a more technical one concerned with training mechanisms and targets. Chapter Two discusses the important theoretical issue of discourse and ideology, then identifies the element of social pluralism in the discourse of *E21C*. Chapter Three continues the discussion by examining the market/business dimension. Through these analyses I adopt a conception of a dominant ideology (capitalistic, patriarchal) for purposes of critique, whilst accepting that a discourse perspective makes it difficult to assert that such strategic official discourses as those I examine have only one 'line' and serve only 'dominant' interests.

Chapter Four examines how the polytechnic sector filters the general state-led imperatives of training. Polytechnic discourse is explored through an examination of their public statements, goals and reports with respect to training. Key themes here are

'participation', 'achievement' and 'equal educational opportunities', which are often woven closely together (somewhat uncritically) in Polytechnic discourse. I analyse both the discourses and extensive data on polytechnic enrolments at this level to question just how 'effective' the commitment to equity, specifically gender equity, really is. Even if the commitment is there, the practice and outcomes may not fulfil the intentions. A survey I conducted, eliciting the views of senior management at one Polytechnic, adds a further dimension to the way we understand the overlaps and tensions between equity and efficiency in training provision.

In the Conclusion, I summarise my analysis and findings, and ask whether there is any point in feminists trying to enter the training discourse in order to bring about anything more positive for women. If it is true that current training initiatives maintain rather than reduce women's marginalisation, perhaps in the end it we just have to 'give it away' as an essentially patriarchal notion. Whilst this thesis has given considerable support to that standpoint, I feel that ultimately that is too negative a stance to take.

It should be apparent from the above, I hope, that the thesis is conceived as a contribution to critical, feminist research in New Zealand. It is worth trying at this stage to expand on these commitments, and to indicate how they have influenced the methodology and presentation of the research undertaken.

First of all, the project is envisaged as 'critical', in the sense that critical social research 'does not take the apparent social structure, social processes, or accepted history for granted. It tries to dig beneath the surface of appearances. It asks how social systems really work, how ideology or history conceals the processes which oppress and control people' (Harvey 1990:6). As I understand it, training remains a formidably 'technically' defined area, where the 'appearance' is a matter of neutrally conceived skills. Yet the social reality is far from that, being much more a matter of the way in which different forms of labour are categorised, rewarded, and

ranked, and in which the hegemonically dominant labour market imperatives (capitalist, patriarchal) are more or less 'served' by the new initiatives in education and skilling.

Secondly (and very much relatedly), my work is motivated by a basically feminist concern to show how - in spite of many advances in some areas of women's social position and working roles - the current hegemonic conception of training continues to favour men and men's working roles. If that is the substantive orientation I take, what methodological consequences has that had on the research process?

This is a difficult question to answer precisely, because the idea that feminist research has to have its own very special and privileged methodological strategies which fit a uniform feminist theoretical position has been superseded by the notion of a number of feminist standpoints. Thus, with no governing theoretical position there are no special, privileged methodological strategies. Rather, it is claimed, the substance and wider political stakes of the subject matter should be the central determinant of whatever methodological aids and results seem relevant and appropriate (Abbott & Wallace 1990:203-7). The following two aspects in particular reflect my preferred stance. Firstly, the selection of the topic itself, and its 'potential to help women's lives' (Jayaratne & Stewart 1995:230), and secondly the avoidance of 'methodic monopoly', and, 'more importantly, method-led research' (Harvey 1990:8). This is important for me, because I have incorporated elements of several research methods: discourse analysis, secondary historical sources, theoretical appraisal, quantitative data manipulation and analysis, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Following Harvey, I see each of these elements as having its own validity and contribution to make in a project like mine.

Whether or not my claim that the thesis is feminist in orientation can be gauged by looking at suggestions by such authors as Stanley and Wise and Sandra Harding. The selection of the problem and

methods of research, Stanley and Wise argue, should be motivated by a commitment to feminist values rather than anything supposedly more 'disinterested'; and it should begin from an appreciation of 'women's experience of women's reality' (Stanley & Wise 1990:154, 160). As explained in the Preface, my own experience as a trainer, coordinating and reflecting upon the experience of other women being 'trained' is the origin of this research. And throughout the investigation has been conducted in the hope that it might contribute in a small way to 'knowledge for change' (Stanley 1990:15), '*for* women' (Harding 1987: 6), and for 'the potential to help women's lives' (Jayaratne & Stewart 1995:230). As Patti Lather puts it: 'very simply, to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one's enquiry' (Lather 1995: 294).

Having said that, it is also true that this project appears not to implement one of the things mentioned by both Stanley and Harding as (ideally anyway) a hallmark of specifically feminist research, namely that the researcher must be located 'on the same critical plane as the subject matter' (Harding 1987:8, cf. Stanley 1990:12). Actually, it is quite hard to grasp exactly what this concrete-sounding advice really means! Certainly, I can appreciate that if I was doing purely qualitative research in a study which was directly examining some aspect of women's experience, then it would be imperative not to 'objectify' those experiences, to fully declare and negotiate my own experiences and interests, and to involve those women as willing research partners in whatever way seemed right from a feminist standpoint. But in fact, my 'object' of enquiry is not intrinsically qualitative, and has a whole range of research subjects and 'products' as its topic: government policies, documents, polytechnic manifestos and statistics, and so on. As such, knowing that the thesis is feminist in Lather's sense cited above, I have felt free to develop 'whatever methodological aids and results seem relevant and appropriate' (Abbott & Wallace 1990:203-7). I would emphatically add that the obvious extension of this thesis would be to find out what the women who have recently been 'trained' through polytechnics actually think of their experiences, outcomes and

prospects; indeed it was part of my original intention to include that dimension. However, I quickly came to realise that such a research task was far larger than I had time, space or resources for as a part-time Masters student.

Thirdly, as mentioned, the main methodological thrust of the thesis, if there is one, is 'discourse analyses', an approach utilising a critical materialist concept of language to 'deconstruct' official texts (Belsey 1980:105). It has been chosen precisely because its explicit purpose is to dig beneath the surface, to 'deconstruct' dominant discourses without necessarily saying what the perspective-neutral 'reality' is out there. Whilst this is actually one favoured feminist approach today, there are difficulties with it. These, as I argue in Chapter Two, concern ongoing questions about whether the critical concept of 'ideology' can be completely dispensed with, as some 'discourse theorists' seem to maintain.

Finally, this is a contribution to New Zealand critical feminism, but we are dealing with general global processes here, as the widespread references to the international feminist and other literatures attest. Here the desired approach is to ensure a blend between 'universal' and 'specific New Zealand foci/texts', trying to avoid the insidious issue of which (the local or the global) is to be preferred or privileged. I am proceeding on the basis that this is a false issue, and that the general and the specific flow 'seamlessly' into one another, and so have chosen to try to blend texts and references in this way too.